

On the Methodology of Teaching Indian Classical Music

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THE PAPER is divided into two sections. The first section deals with classical music in general, and the second half with certain specific aspects of instrumental music.

I

Before the commencement of any intensive musical training, the student has to be carefully assessed. His basic musical capabilities, his initial grasp over the Swaras and sense of rhythm have to be scanned and evaluated. This process is sometimes a little time-consuming, and may continue alongside the elementary training. Strong points are readily discernible; but weaknesses and aberrations are sometimes slow in manifesting themselves.

There are natural musicians in various degrees. Some can reproduce songs or hum tunes correctly, having a ready grasp over the relative distance of the successive notes of a tune. They can touch the correct notes instinctively, without however having any idea of the notation. This group is generally accepted by teachers as promising learners to the exclusion of others who do not possess such an initial level of competence. But this notion has been proved wrong in many cases where a person who had shown absolutely no musical flair at start flowered later into a very competent musician.

The next question is: should you as a teacher subject all students, having different levels of competence, to the same period and degree of drilling? There are two schools of thought. One says that in case of a high initial competence the final level of attainment is correspondingly higher, and a minimum period and degree of drilling are essential in all cases, which will eventually allow each student to reach his greatest height. Others, who do not subscribe to this viewpoint, are strongly in favour of tailoring the curriculum and the drilling schedule according to initial individual levels of competence. They say that the drive and initiative of a sharp and

gifted student would get blunted if he or she is not rewarded for his or her early attainments.

In all cases, however, it is now thought necessary to alleviate the sense of drudgery that pervades the period of practising the scales. Some teachers take recourse to attractive permutations and combinations of notes (Alaṁkāras); some others feed their disciples with simple compositions in various rāgas with simple Tāns, etc. Whatever be the method of administration, each musician must practise the scales in some way or other throughout his performing life in order to keep his hold on the notes (or more exactly, the correct Śrutis). This is almost as essential as the daily bath or brushing of the teeth or free-hand exercise for retaining bodily fitness. Practising Sā, Re, Gā, Mā, etc. should be a must, not only for the learner to gain accuracy of note, but also for the performer to retain his hold on correct notes or Śrutis.

The practice of Swaras is universally accepted as the first step in learning music; and vocalists and instrumentalists alike are subjected to this preliminary step for different lengths of time.

Alaṁkāras or Paltās bring some novelty into the otherwise boring routine of long stretches of Sā-Re-Gā-Mā practice, by introducing the elements of rāga (or more correctly, Thāt) and rhythm. By composing Paltās in three, five, seven, etc. notes, the rhythmic elements of Ektāl or Dādrā, Jhāptāl, Dhamār or Rupak can be infused in the young learner's mind.

Alaṁkāras can be innumerable; and as the learner proceeds his practice of Alaṁkāras can and should be made more and more complicated, both to feed his interest and to make him well-versed in various changes in direction and movement. Alaṁkāras are in fact the components of Tāns; and proficiency in the former begets proficiency in the latter in due course.

Some Alaṁkāras may later be turned into Halaks by replacing the Sargams with Ākārs, or turning staccato notes into Mīrs. Some other Alaṁkāras may be slightly modified or recast to initiate the learners into the idioms of Ādī and Anāghāt. To illustrate:

Sā Re Sā Gā Re Gā Re Gā
Re Gā Re Mā Gā Mā Gā Mā
Gā Mā Gā Pā Mā Pā Mā Pā, etc.

When the learner has acquired a reasonably good grasp of and fluency in the above Alaṁkāra, change it in the following manner: Take Sā Re Sā Gā Re Gā Re Gā and omit the second and third Re, turning it into Sā Re Sā Ga—Gā—Gā. Ask the student to maintain

silence over the small intervals of time during which he would have uttered the Re-s. Having practised the Sargam to the accompaniment of beats, he will be instinctively able in most cases to calculate the exact length of time during which he uttered the now-omitted Re-s, and keep silent during these. Properly designed and administered, Alamkāras can provide the learner with a good grounding in Laya.

Our music, in its final and finished stage, is a totally individual performance. Quite apart from the individuality in thought, imagination, mood, idiom and nature (meditative or dynamic), there remains the undeniable fact that no two performers touch exactly similar or identical Śrutis in respect of any note. Those who are nearest the correct Śrutis are the luckiest, and the most Surilā ones. And attainment of accuracy of note is a thing to strive for in complete isolation.

But at the initial stages when a student has not been able to get over his deficiencies, it is often found that by putting him in a group of better performers and making the entire group recite and practise fixed compositions, the erring one is able to correct himself a lot. If he is inaccurate in Swaras, the immediate impact of others' playing something else makes him aware of his own inaccuracy, and he instinctively tries to correct himself. The same is the case with regard to rhythm. Whoever lags behind immediately realizes he is out of step with the rest of the company; and he soon resynchronizes himself. This can be compared to a group march where anybody's fault becomes instantaneously evident; and the defaulter is bound to take corrective measures immediately. Otherwise he would fall foul of the next man.

The benefits of such group drilling can be well utilized at initial stages, when students have a comparatively lower level of competence in both Sur and Laya, to bring them up to a reasonable standard. The group should however be formed with care. If all members are equally errant, no progress can be expected. There should be quite a few steady ones to act as anchors. Remarkable improvement regarding both Laya and Sur has been achieved in many cases by drilling such carefully constituted groups. The final stage of a musician's formation, however, has to be totally on his own.

Whatever the reasons, the younger generation of musicians generally have an irresistible fancy for high speed and complicated patterns. Learners, from instinct and from the suggestions received from listening to such music, are also prone to moving fast while practising. This has to be checked assiduously. Speed is a matter

of muscle; accuracy is not. The correct speed for practising, in each individual's case, is that speed at which he has the greatest possible control over himself and can touch the notes to the best of his ability. Whenever this control is found to be slipping, one should immediately step down to a lower speed, where control is regained. Nowadays the gurus scarcely have the time; but where possible the disciple should be closely watched during his Rīāz and confined or restricted to the correct speed.

In initiating a student into the concept of rāga one should proceed in steps according to the elements involved:

(a) *Importance of a particular note*: The concept of Vādī and Nyās notes may be initiated through a simple procedure. Take a series of notes, even the simple Sā Re Gā Mā Pā Dhā Ni Sā. Go on repeatedly singing or playing it; and each time dwell longer on a different intermediate note, e.g. first on Re, next on Gā, then Mā, etc. Let the student realize how the colour of the entire phrase becomes totally different each time because of dwelling longer on different notes. Secondly, repeat the phrase again, this time giving a greater pause after each note; and the effect will again be totally different, like Sā Re, Gā Mā Pā Dhā Ni Sā, Sā Re Gā, Mā Pā Dhā Ni Sā, Sā Re Gā Mā Pā Dhā Ni Sā.

(b) *Relative sharpness or flatness of the same note (Śruti)*: This takes a longer time to conceive; but here also it is advantageous to take, for instance, a Mālkauns phrase and a Darbārī phrase both ending in Komal Gāndhār. Sing or play them repeatedly side by side, to have a feel of the different Śrutis touched by them. Undulations of note in different Rāgas, such as the Komal Gāndhār of Mālkauns and Miyān-ki-Malhār, can be felt in the same manner.

(c) Finally come the *sequences and combinations of notes*, the Ārohi, Avarohi and the Chalans or basic movements. As is the almost universal opinion now, Ārohi-avarohi is a necessity; but it is certainly not sufficient to picture a rāga completely. Basic movements or Chalans are also essential.

Different schools or individuals have different modes of teaching. The generally prevailing practice is to start with simple compositions in the major rāgas, probably to sustain the disciple's interest and initiative and, after he has attained a degree of proficiency, to move on to the more complicated rāgas. At one stage, a return to the original simple rāgas taught during the early stage is essential to broaden one's outlook on each. And it is advisable here to go into as many Bandishes as possible in a single Rāga, to visualize from how many different angles a rāga can be approached and treated. It is essential also at this stage to spell out the difference between rāgas

having more or less the same notes but altogether different sentiments.

II

So long, we had been considering classical music in general; and now we would move on to instrumental classical music which has special problems of its own.

One primary difficulty with our instruments is that even the adult-size ones are made by different makers in different shapes and lengths. Although there has been an effort at standardization over the past few decades, this difficulty persists still to a large extent. The result is that the man-machine matching is ergonomically deficient in most cases. A five-footer and a six-footer are sometimes saddled with instruments of the same size. Or worse, the larger man has the smaller instrument and vice versa, with the result that while one has to jump at each step the other crams himself into an uncomfortably short space.

This anomaly manifests itself in other forms as well. A child is very often not started off at an early age (which is desirable) because he has not 'grown big enough for the instrument'. So when the guardian of a beginner decides to start him off, the youngster is given a full-size instrument (perhaps because his aunt or uncle once learnt sitār and the instrument happens to be available); and the poor boy's handling of the instrument looks like the handling of a full-size bicycle by an eleven-year-old. There should be instruments in three or at least two gradually diminishing sizes besides the full-scale ones to cater to growing children.

Knowing one's instrument is almost as difficult a task as knowing oneself; yet both are equally essential. Even when two instruments are identical, each has its own peculiarities, strong and weak points. When the learner has gone past the primary stage, it is very necessary to awaken his consciousness about this. The learner's study of his own instrument should cover several points. Firstly, the learner should know how to hold it correctly, so that playing becomes the least difficult. Secondly, he should likewise know what touch (in pressing the strings) and what weight (in plucking or bowing) produces what response from the instrument, from which one can decide how to achieve the best tonality, and also various ranges of timbre, sharpness and mellowness. In sitār and Sarod, the place and angle at which the string is plucked decides whether the sound will be sharp (full of Jowāri) or round (bass). A proficient

performer must know how to bring the entire range of tonality out of his instrument. Last but not the least, the qualities of sound that the instrument offers have to be weighed to decide whether they will suit the mood and expectations of the performer or whether a change of instrument will be necessary. The instrument is like a life partner and should be chosen carefully during the early days, since changing it at middle age is not very stabilizing in most cases.

Fingering is the art (and science) of using one's fingers in the correct way to manipulate the strings while the right hand goes on plucking. Most of the methods of fingering are, and should be, based on ergonomic considerations. Ergonomics, already mentioned, is human engineering, and aims at proper matching of the performer with his instrument, as also the best way to use his limbs so that the desired result can be obtained with minimum effort.

Fingering of any instrument should be programmed in such a way that (1) each finger shares the work as best as possible; (2) one finger does not do another's work, i.e. jump from place to place, which can be avoided by putting down another finger which is free; and (3) the movement of the left hand is economized to a large extent, and does not have to replace the movement of a finger. The entire affair should be based on sound common sense, but the egos of certain gurus or Gharānā-bias sometimes guide it in other directions.

Sometimes one particular performer is strong in certain kinds of Bāj (idioms); and to help or augment the same, he modifies his fingering. So long as the end result is achieved, the method can surely be justified; but it will be found eventually that this also is in conformity with ergonomic principles. With sufficient effort and practice, a human being has been known even to paint pictures with his toes; but that is surely not a method to be followed under normal circumstances, and certainly does not bring the best out of the equipment. □